

Rumor by Frost1610

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Hurt-Comfort, Romance

Language: English

Characters: J. Hopper, Joyce B.

Pairings: J. Hopper/Joyce B.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-10-02 10:02:14

Updated: 2019-10-02 10:02:14

Packaged: 2019-12-12 17:39:32

Rating: M

Chapters: 1

Words: 13,168

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Nothing ever happened in sleepy Hawkins, Indiana until one of the neighborhood busybodies noticed that a certain police chief was spending an awful lot of time at the Byers house.

Rumor

This fic (and its title) are unashamedly inspired by a the Lee Brice song Rumor. There are a couple quotes taken directly from the lyrics. You should listen to it. But not the bastardized pop version. The actual 'country' version. This was meant to be a one-shot (and it still is), but it got completely out of control and is super long. I just couldn't find a way to break it up without having some super duper long chapters and some super duper short chapters with little/no development.

Nothing ever happened in Hawkins, Indiana. Unless, of course, you count the strange and unexplained disappearances, a portal to another dimension, and a little girl with supernatural abilities. But psychology dictates that we often choose to ignore things we can't find a logical explanation for. And so, nothing ever happened in sleepy Hawkins, Indiana until one of the neighborhood busybodies noticed that a certain police chief was spending an awful lot of time at the Byers house.

As it turns out patching holes caused by other-worldly creatures and cleaning scorched demogorgon out of the carpet and drywall was a bigger task than Joyce and Jonathan imagined. Joyce hated the pity she saw in the eyes of those who shopped at Melvald's. She declined numerous offers of assistance knowing full well the town gossips were just trying to get a look at Crazy Joyce's destroyed house. God knows Lonnie had spread that information all over before making his way out of town. The one person she'd repeatedly turned away until he'd become so persistent he'd managed to annoy her into accepting his help was Jim Hopper.

Joyce didn't want his help. She didn't want anyone's help. She could handle this on her own. But when Hopper repeatedly turned up on her doorstep bearing supplies to fix drywall and siding and with new carpet and paint she found it difficult to turn him away after awhile. She suspected Hopper felt guilty about initially not believing her about Will and the Upside Down. But who could blame him? Until you've seen it for yourself, who in their right mind would believe in monsters and alternate dimensions?

Most nights after work Hopper drove over to the Byers house and worked into the night to repair and repaint while Joyce tended to Will and cooked dinner. Over the course of a few weeks, it became the norm for them. Once all of the damage had been repaired or replaced or otherwise covered up Hopper found himself looking for other projects around the house. He cleaned the gutters, fixed a window in Jonathan's room that wouldn't stay open, and cut down a tree in the backyard that had been dead longer than Will and Jonathan had been alive.

If asked outright, Joyce would deny enjoying Hopper's presence around the house. She would tell you he'd bullied her into letting him help. She would tell you he was only doing it out of guilt. What she wouldn't tell you is that she felt safer, more secure. She felt like maybe Hopper's presence was good for the boys. She felt like maybe it had been good for Hopper too. He hadn't been drinking nearly as much and as far she knew he was no longer screwing his way through every available woman in Hawkins. So when he'd completed every possible project and no longer had reason to come around Joyce would deny missing him.

During those couple of months Hopper's presence at the Byers house did not go unnoticed by the general public. At first the whispers around town were that he just felt sorry for her. After all, Lonnie had made sure that anyone who listen knew that Joyce was crazy. But as the weeks wore on rumors started swirling about the chief of police taking up with the local nutjob. After all, Hopper was damaged goods himself, it made sense.

While Joyce found herself blissfully ignoring the whispered rumors and too-long stares, Hopper was having no such luck. Sure people had talked when he'd come back to Hawkins. His failed marriage, dead daughter, and inability to keep his big city police job were all people could talk about for weeks. He'd either gotten better at ignoring it or people eventually just stopped talking about it. He was beginning to think it was the latter given the difficulty he was having now. It had been weeks since he'd stopped going to the Byers' house, but the whispering certainly hadn't stopped. His own deputies had been merciless. If they were going to talk he figured he should give them something to talk about.

For the first time in weeks Hopper stopped by the Byers' house. Nervous for reasons he couldn't pin down, Hopper stood on the porch, hat in hand, and knocked on the door.

"Hey Chief." Jonathan greeted.

"Uh, hey kid." He returned. He peered around Jonathan, but didn't see Joyce.

"Everything okay?" Jonathan asked.

Hopper hesitated. "What? Oh, yeah, everything's fine. Your mom around?"

"No." Jonathan looked down. "She's at the store. She's been working a lot of doubles the last few weeks."

"I see." Hopper responded. "You guys okay? Will's okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. We're good. Will's better."

"Good. That's, uh, good." Hopper stalled, but he wasn't sure what he was waiting for. Was he expecting Joyce to materialize out of thin air? "Have a good night then." He said he put his hat back on and turned toward the Blazer. Before he could get off the porch Jonathan spoke up again.

"She misses you, you know?" He paused. "She would never admit it...but she does."

Hopper just nodded and trudged back to his truck.

Joyce finished counting down the register before locking it in the safe. She turned off the lights in the coolers and unplugged the open sign before locking up and setting the alarm. It had been a long day. Not just because she worked a double, but because no matter how hard she worked to ignore it, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. She certainly wasn't about to admit that Jim Hopper could be that missing piece.

"Melvald really shouldn't be making you lock up the place by yourself, you know."

Of course she knew. Hawkins was small. How could she not know there had been a string of robberies over the last couple of months?

"I can take care of myself, Hop." She was annoyed that, that familiar calm had settled over her just at the sound of his voice. Joyce dangled a tiny can of pepper spray on a keychain behind her.

"No one is more aware of that than I am." She could hear the smile in his voice and that annoyed her even more. Did he even know what kind of effect he had on her?

Joyce's shoulders drooped forward even more if it were possible, but she felt some of the tension leave her body. Finally she pulled her key out of the lock and turned to face Jim Hopper.

"What are you doing here, Hop?"

"Checking in. I stopped by the house. Jonathan said you'd been working more doubles lately."

Joyce tensed. "Both of those boys know they're not supposed to answer the door when I'm not there."

"He could see my truck, Joyce. He knew who I was."

"That's not the point."

He could see that she was getting upset. He stepped forward and put a hand on her arm. It was meant to comfort, but she jerked back like he'd burned her.

"You shouldn't do that."

"Do what?" He was starting to sound exasperated.

Touch me, she thought. *More people will talk.*

Joyce looked up at him, eyes large and wet with unshed tears. Something had set her off, but he wasn't entirely positive it was his interaction with Jonathan.

"Come on," he said.

"What?"

"Come. On."

"Hop, I have to go home. The boys..."

"Will be just fine without you. Everything was quiet and there was a box of pizza sitting on the coffee table so they've already eaten."

"Hop."

"Just come with me. We'll grab something to eat. Catch up. You know, things normal adults do."

This earned him a snort from Joyce. "Since when are we normal?"

Despite her better judgement, Joyce nodded and followed Hopper to the coffee shop around the corner. They sat down at a small table by the window, both pointedly ignoring the looks they knew they were getting. A young woman, who was entirely too perky for this time of the evening, came to the table to take their order.

"Evening Chief," she drawled as she shot him her best thousand watt smile.

Joyce rolled her eyes. She shouldn't even be surprised at this point. Girls had been throwing themselves at Jim Hopper since they were in high school. It didn't matter that he was probably old enough to be her father.

Hopper gave her a cursory glance and then looked back at the menu. "I'll have the chicken salad and coffee. Black."

Joyce smiled inwardly as the girl deflated when she obviously didn't get the desired reaction from Hopper.

"And for you, ma'am?" She'd lost all her perk.

Joyce smiled sweetly at the girl, "I'll have the same. Creamer with my coffee though, please."

The girl nodded and went on her way.

Joyce looked at Hopper with a raised eyebrow. She wasn't sure he even realized what he'd done.

"What?" He asked.

"You just broke that poor girl's heart, Jim Hopper."

"What are you talking about?"

"That girl was flirting with you and you didn't even acknowledge her."

Now it was Hopper's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"You mean to tell me that Jim Hopper, the man known far and wide in this little town for loving them and leaving them, can't recognize when a waitress is flirting with him?" Joyce actually laughed this time.

Hopper just shrugged and smiled. "What can I say?"

It wasn't that he hadn't recognized it. He just wasn't interested. That happened more often than not these days. He'd tried picking up girls here and there. He'd gone on a few dates. None of it had gone any further than dinner, drinks, and maybe some heavy petting. He'd once been able to dull the ache of his lost life with alcohol, sedatives, and meaningless sex. Now he found that there was only one person who could dull the ache; or maybe he'd just finally admitted it to himself.

They chatted while they waited for their food. He asked about Will. She asked if he'd seen anymore signs of El. They both tried not to notice the forlorn waitress or the giggling and pointing that was going on behind the counter. They ate their sandwiches in companionable silence.

The waitress came back with refills on their coffee and the checks.

"I'll take both of those," Hopper said as he held out a hand.

"Hop, I can pay for my own food."

"Yeah, but I'm the one who drug you out here after a long day at work. It's the least I could do."

They both turned when they heard the snickering behind the counter. "I **told** you it was a date," the waitress said to her friend who was laughing now. "Shhh! They're going to hear us!" She whispered.

Joyce rolled her eyes. Hopper shook his head. He left the money on the table and they both put their jackets back on to head out. Hopper walked Joyce back to her car and waited as she unlocked the decrepit Gremlin.

"We probably shouldn't do this again, Hop."

She could have sworn she saw him visibly deflate, but she was sure it was just her imagination. Jim Hopper could have his pick of any woman in town. He had no reason to be disappointed that Joyce Byers was telling him they shouldn't see each other anymore. It's not like it was a date.

"Uh, yeah. I guess not." He tried to hide the deep disappointment he felt welling up. "Goodnight, Joyce," he sighed.

Hopper adjusted his hat on his head and walked back over to the Blazer. He watched as Joyce rested her forehead on the steering wheel for a few moments before sticking the key in the ignition. He wondered if not seeing him again was what she really wanted, or if she was just sick of hearing people talk. It was probably wishful thinking on his part. Why would she want him anyway? He was just another damaged man and it wasn't worth investing the time in someone who'd never change. He didn't want to be another Lonnie, just dragging her down further.

When he focused in on her again, he saw Joyce hitting the steering wheel in frustration. He watched as the lights flickered and died as she tried again to start the car. He started the Blazer and pulled up in front of her.

"Need a jump?"

Joyce startled at Hopper's reappearance. She swiped at her face,

embarrassed that she was crying. Though if she were being honest with herself she wasn't entirely sure if she was crying over the car or Hopper. She didn't really want to think about it.

"It's not the battery," she sniffed, "It's the alternator. Jonathan's been telling me for months I need to get it replaced."

"Then let me give you a lift home."

"Hop..."

"It's just a ride home Joyce."

"If someone sees..."

"Sees what? The chief of police giving someone a ride home because her car won't start?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, Joyce. I don't think I do. So why don't you enlighten me?" He sounded angry now.

Joyce just shook her head and got out of the car. She locked the door and slammed it shut before turning on her heel to go back to the coffee shop. Before she could move forward, Hopper blocked her path.

"Come on, Joyce! What are you going to do? Call a cab? No cab will go out to your house this late. You know that."

"I'll call Jonathan to come get me," she bit back.

"And make him get Will out of bed to come with him? Is that what you want? Getting a ride home from me is so bad you'd drag both your boys out here?"

This caught her attention. "It's not that. It's just..."

"It's just what, Joyce? You don't want me around anymore? That's fine. But at least let me take you home so the boys don't have to come all the way into town to get you tonight." He didn't sound mad

anymore. He sounded sad. Defeated.

The ride back to Joyce's house was silent, but for the occasional snuffle on her side of the vehicle. All this was going to do was cause Hopper more trouble. There would be even more talking and staring now. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass and tried to figure out how to fix this mess.

Joyce was so lost in her own head that she didn't even notice that they'd pulled into her driveway. Hopper shut off the Blazer and pulled the keys out of the ignition. Neither one of them said anything for a long while and neither made a move to get out of the vehicle.

Finally Joyce opened the door and slid out. She turned back to look at Hopper who sat watching; waiting for her to do or say something, anything.

"I'm sorry, Hop." Joyce said sadly as she shut the door.

"Joyce. Joyce wait!" He called as he struggled out of the truck. "Sorry for what?"

Joyce turned to look at him, but didn't stop walking. "You should go."

"Wait just a damn minute, would you?" He barked.

"You have to go Hopper. Someone will see..."

"See what, Joyce? That I gave you a ride home when your car wouldn't start? That two friends had coffee together? That an old friend helped you do some repairs? What are they going to see? Huh, Joyce? What?"

"They think there's something going on between us," she yelled back. "You don't need that trouble." Joyce added quietly.

Hopper caught up to her by the time she reached the door. Her key was already in the lock by the time he closed his hand over hers.

"And what's so bad about that?" He asked softly. "What's so bad about a bunch of old ladies with nothing but time on their hands thinking that there's something going on between us?"

"It's not just the little old ladies, Hop. What about those two girls tonight?"

"What about them?"

"And the rumors. It's like people think I can't hear them when they come into Melvald's. It doesn't bother me, I learned to live with it a long time ago, but you...you shouldn't have to deal with that."

"Then let's make it true," he rumbled as he moved his hand to her face, stroking gently. "It's not a rumor if it's true."

"Hop..." She shook her head gently.

"Come on, Joyce. I feel it," he whispered as if afraid he might scare her away, "and I know you feel it too. The last few weeks I've tried to come up with reasons to stop by here. Things I could fix. Reasons to stop by and check. And I didn't because I was afraid...I don't know what I was afraid of." He shook his head and backed away.

Joyce just watched him, unsure of what to say. She never even suspected that he might have feelings for her. She always figured he helped her out of guilt. They'd had their time in high school, but when they graduated and she stayed behind while he went off to college and then Vietnam, she figured her chances with Jim Hopper were long gone.

Hopper sighed. "I should go."

Joyce didn't stop him and watched in stunned silence as he got back in the Blazer and sped away. She opened the door and dropped her purse and jacket on the kitchen table. She checked in on both boys before lying down in her own bed. It was a sleepless night as she replayed the conversation with Hopper over and over.

For the first time since Will's disappearance, Jim Hopper got drunk. He got so drunk he contemplated calling Diane. Something he only did when he was so drunk he knew he wouldn't remember it the next morning. In the end he laid down on the couch to wallow in his own misery. He slept a dreamless sleep for the first time in months and awoke to the shrill sound of his phone ringing and the sun shining

brightly enough to burn holes in his retinas.

"What?" He answered the phone without preamble.

"James Hopper, do you have any idea what time it is?" Flo asked.

"Well, I'm going to guess it's late since you're yelling at me," he grumbled.

"I hope you don't think you're going down this road again Jim. I won't stick around to see it. Phil Larson has called three times about his lawn gnomes being stolen *again*. Personally I think he should just get rid of the things, they're nothing but trouble."

"Flo, did you really just call to yell at me and tell me about Larson's lawn gnomes?" Exhaustion evident in his voice.

"No. Joyce Byers called."

Hopper perked up. "And?"

"And what?"

"Is everything okay?"

"She didn't say."

"What *did* she say," Hopper ground out.

"Well, not much of anything really. When I told her you weren't here, she just hung up. It was very odd."

"Flo..." He grumbled.

"Get your act together and get down here, Chief." With that, she hung up the phone.

Hopper groaned as he sat up. He was too damn old to be getting drunk and sleeping on the couch when he had to work the next morning. He swore every joint and muscle in his body cracked and protested as he drug himself off the couch. He thought about cracking open a beer to take the edge off, but Flo was right, he didn't

need to go back down that road. Ten minutes later he was showered, dressed, and headed out the door.

"Hey, hey, Chief! Heard you and Joyce had a nice little date at the coffee shop last, she keep you out too late boss?"

"Phil!" Flo chastised.

Hopper didn't even acknowledge the exchange, he just stalked into his office and slammed the door. He looked over the phone messages from Flo. One that Joyce had called. Three from Phil Larson. One from Melvald about a car parked in front of the store overnight. Hopper rolled his eyes at that one. The old man couldn't even recognize his employee's car. He picked up the phone to dial Joyce and then set it down again. He repeated that cycle three more times before he gave up and called Phil Larson. Joyce didn't want to see him. She'd made that clear last night.

By the time Hopper was done for the day Joyce's car had been moved from Melvald's. He wasn't sure if she'd gotten it towed or gotten it started. He tried to tell himself he didn't care, but that wasn't true. Since her car was gone, he figured it was safe and ventured into Melvald's for frozen dinners and beer.

Joyce turned down Donald's request that she work a double. After little sleep the night before and dealing with Donald trying to have her car towed she didn't have the patience to work a double, even if she did need the money. Jonathan was able to get the car towed to the shop and the alternator replaced, but it wouldn't be ready until the next day. She was stuck relying on her son for a ride home. She wasn't going to make the boys come out late to get her.

Most of the day her thoughts had been consumed by Hopper. What exactly had he meant last night? What did he mean he "felt it." She knew what she felt, but she wasn't about to project her feelings onto him. Their time had passed. The one bright spot in her day had been a visit by Bob Newby. He might be the one person in the entire town that hadn't "heard" about her and Hopper. Though that could be blamed entirely on him having just moved back to town. Just the same, it had been nice to catch up with someone who wasn't digging for information. He suggested they get coffee sometime, and while

she wasn't altogether thrilled at the idea, it would be nice to get her mind off of a certain police chief for awhile, so she'd agreed.

The next few days passed agonizingly slowly. Joyce hadn't seen or heard from Hopper. This wasn't unusual in itself, but she figured he'd at least call after she'd called the station looking for him. She'd told herself she was just calling straighten out the whole situation with Donald and her car, but she knew he'd be able to figure that out on his own. What she really wanted was for him to explain what had happened that night. Instead of calling him back, she'd let the next few days pass in a haze of doubles.

Saturday afternoon came and Joyce found herself unexpectedly nervous about having coffee with Bob. This wasn't a date...was it? Just two old friends getting together for coffee. Just like she'd done with Hopper a few days prior. Joyce threw on a nicer pair of jeans and a green flannel print blouse. She left the boys money for pizza and reminded Will that if he wanted to go somewhere Jonathan needed to drive him.

Coffee with Bob was nice. And because the universe has a sense of humor, they'd ended up at the same coffee shop with the same waitress. She nearly laughed out loud at the wide-eyed look on the girl's face. This time the snickering and whispering held an air of confusion. Bob was oblivious and that was probably for the better. To Joyce's surprise, she'd had a good time. Bob was funny in that nerdy sort of way. Not really her type, but wasn't she a little too old to have a type?

After coffee Bob suggested they take a walk. Joyce didn't have any other plans for the evening and Jonathan kept telling her she needed to get out more, so she agreed. They walked around downtown, they peered into windows of closed shops and reminisced about high school. Though they hadn't hung out much, their social circles sometimes crossed paths. Before she knew it, the sun had set. Bob walked her back to her car and very politely asked permission to kiss her goodnight. Joyce laughed a little and agreed. It felt good to laugh again, so good that she was completely unaware that Jim Hopper got a full view of that chaste goodnight kiss.

Hopper wondered where he'd gone wrong. Somehow he'd lost Joyce

to Lonnie Byers 20 years ago and now she'd chosen that bumbling idiot Bob Newby over him. He was such an idiot. No wonder she'd been so standoffish that night. Maybe their time had passed after all. Hopper took his usual seat at the bar and signaled the bartender for a drink.

"Been awhile, Chief."

"Yeah. I guess it has."

"Things go south with you and Byers?"

Hopper took a long pull on his beer. "There was no *thing* with me and Joyce."

"Coulda fooled every one of us. You spent an awful lot of time at her place for nothing going on."

"She just needed some help getting settled after the kid got back. Lonnie left the place a mess. I figured I could help out a bit. That's all."

"Huh. Lonnie said the old nutjob tore that place apart herself."

Hopper's face got red. "She's not a nutjob."

The bartender backed up, hands in the air, "Okay... okay. Not a nutjob, got it."

"There was just..." He'd already made his way halfway through the bottle. "There was a lot of stuff Lonnie never did or only half did. She doesn't have anyone else."

The bartender just nodded. Clearly Hopper had it bad for the woman, but he damn sure wasn't about to admit it. He cracked open another beer and set it in front of Hopper before checking on his other customers. Hopper was so lost in thought that he didn't even notice the young blonde that sat down next to him.

"Rough night, Chief?"

"Something like that." He immediately recognized her as their

waitress from the other night.

"My name's Julie," she offered.

"Nice name," Hopper responded noncommittally. He was already starting to feel the effects of the second beer. Maybe he needed to start drinking again.

As the night wore on, Hopper became more talkative. The alcohol had loosened him up enough so that he could at least pretend like he wasn't completely miserable. He bought a couple drinks for Julie as they talked. She was just waitressing to bring in a little extra cash while she went to school for journalism. Hopper nearly laughed out loud, but managed to stifle it. He genuinely couldn't imagine this girl writing anything worth reading, though maybe she was better at writing than carrying on a conversation.

Eventually Hopper had had enough to drink that he thought he could maybe stomach taking this girl home for the evening. If Joyce could intentionally give him up for Bob Newby, of all people, then he could make himself use meaningless sex as a way to forget about her. Or so he thought.

"So...you live all the way out here?" She asked.

He could tell she was testing the waters. Trying to figure out if the chief of police really lived in some backwoods trailer on a lake.

"Yep," he replied, popping the 'P,' "that a problem?"

"Uh, no." She tried to recover, "I guess I'm not really sure what I expected now that I think about it."

Hopper slid out of the seat and slammed the door.

"You coming?"

Julie followed him out of the Blazer and into the house.

"You, uh, want something to drink?" He asked as he cracked open another beer. He'd lost count of how many he'd had.

"I'm fine."

Hopper watched as she stepped closer to him. She put her hands on his chest and leaned up to kiss him. She was a few inches taller than Joyce, so he didn't have to lean down quite as far to reach her. As she kissed him, her hands started to wander. Hopper set his beer on the counter behind him and let his hands do the same. Soon he had her pressed against the kitchen counter as her fingers worked the buttons on his worn flannel. He palmed one breast and squeezed gently causing her to sigh into his mouth. Julie ran one hand up his stomach and chest and over his shoulder as she tried to push his shirt off. Hopper lifted her off the floor and put her on the counter so he didn't have to bend so much. He willed his body to respond to her touch, but no matter how hard he tried, the only thing that worked was picturing Joyce. As Julie's hands reached for the button on his jeans, Hopper growled and backed away.

Julie tried to hide her confusion but she wasn't having much luck. "I'm sorry...I." She didn't know what else to say. She wasn't sure what she'd done wrong.

Hopper picked up his beer again and started to pace. He didn't say anything and eventually he stepped out onto the deck, leaving Julie in the kitchen to put herself back together. He set his beer on the deck railing and fastened the buttons on his pants and shirt. He stared out at the moon on the lake and tried to figure out where he'd gone so wrong.

"She doesn't deserve you, you know." Julie's voice came from behind him.

It wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"Yeah. You're right. She doesn't. And neither do you. No one deserves the kind of screwed up that I am." Hopper ran his hand through his hair and let it rest on the back of his neck.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know," he sighed. "I know what you meant. And you're wrong."

"Why? Why do you deserve what she did to you?"

"She didn't do anything to me. I just...it's complicated."

"But she chose that weird guy who runs the RadioShack."

"Yeah. She did." He finished off his beer. "She deserves to be happy."

"So do you."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure this is the way to do it."

He could tell he'd hurt her. He didn't even need to look at her for confirmation.

"Come on. I'll take you home."

"Let me stay. I can make you forget."

"That's the problem." Hopper felt like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. "I don't want to forget."

Julie shook her head. "You're a real piece of work, Jim Hopper."

"So they tell me."

After an argument about whether or not a cab would come all the way out there to pick her up, Julie begrudgingly allowed Hopper to take her back into town to get her car. It was well after midnight by the time he got back home. Again he fell asleep on the couch, half drunk beer on the coffee table beside him.

At first Joyce wasn't sure what had stopped the rumors about her and Hopper. No one really seemed to be talking about her and Bob. Maybe because none of them really remembered Bob. A couple of weeks went by before she got her first hint of what had finally stopped the gossip mill that was Hawkins. She hadn't gotten any specifics; only that Hopper had taken that waitress from the coffee shop home. She hadn't seen or heard from Hopper since that ill-fated interaction on her front porch and that was causing her more distress than she'd like to admit. Her time spent with Bob: however, had been enjoyable. The boys hadn't seemed terribly thrilled about the idea,

but she suspected they hadn't said much because they just wanted her to be happy.

As the weeks went on, Bob began spending more time at the house. This meant Jonathan spent less time at the house, much to Will's dismay. Jonathan was often his get out of jail free card, but with him gone more, Will had to rely on Joyce (and sometimes Bob) if he wanted a ride into town. It wasn't that he didn't like Bob...he just wasn't...Hopper. Up until recently, Will had still been having nightmares about the whole Upside Down ordeal. So, naturally, Joyce had avoided having Bob spend the night. She decided to give it a trial run on a night that Will had been invited to stay at the Wheelers' and Jonathan was out doing god-knows-what.

They had a nice evening. Bob took her to Enzo's for dinner. They walked around downtown for a bit. When they returned to the house, Bob produced a nice bottle of wine and they made popcorn and settled in for a movie. They got halfway through the movie before Bob finally...*finally*...made a move. Joyce thought this was what she wanted, she really did. Or maybe she liked the idea of having someone other than Hopper to occupy her thoughts. She tried to get into, she really did.

"I'm sorry." She apologized.

"What is there to be sorry for?" Bob asked, genuinely understanding.

"I don't know. I really like you Bob. I..."

"Hey! No need to explain. This is still new. We've got plenty of time. No need to rush into anything."

He was always so polite and understanding. Of course he was. Joyce put her head in her hands.

"I guess I'm just tired. And worried about Will," she added as an afterthought.

"Totally understandable." He smiled. "What do you say we finish the movie and let you get to bed?"

"Well, you could stay," she offered.

Bob's face lit up, "I'd like that."

Joyce was half asleep before the credits started to roll. As it turned out, she really was tired. Bob shut off the tv, picked up the wine glasses and popcorn bowl, and gently led Joyce back to her room. Ever the gentleman, he stepped out of the room while Joyce changed. When they finally climbed into bed, he respectfully kept his distance on the opposite side of the bed.

Despite her exhaustion, Joyce tossed and turned long after Bob had fallen asleep. She knew this wasn't fair to Bob, but she really wanted this to work out. She needed it to work out. She couldn't keep holding on to a future she didn't have with Hopper. If they hadn't already crossed that bridge before, they certainly had now. She hadn't seen or spoken to him in more than a month. She got the distinct feeling he was avoiding her and she suspected Bob was the reason for that.

Eventually exhaustion won out and Joyce fell into a fitful sleep. She felt like it'd only been minutes, but it must've been a few hours, because the alarm clock read 3:17 when the phone rang. Joyce nearly launched herself out of bed to get it. On the other end of the line was Karen Wheeler.

"Is everything okay?" Joyce asked frantically.

"Yeah, yeah. Everything's fine. Will just had a nightmare. He seems pretty shaken up."

Karen handed the phone off to Will.

"I'm sorry, Mom." He sounded miserable.

"Will, baby, it's fine! Is it the same one? From before?"

"Yeah. But it's okay. I'm okay now."

"Are you sure? I can come get you."

There was silence on the other end. He didn't want to ask her to come get him. He knew Bob was there.

"It's okay. I'm coming to get you. I'll be there in just a little bit."

She hung up after letting Karen know she'd be there shortly to get Will.

"Is everything okay?" Bob asked, concerned.

Joyce nodded. "Will...he has nightmares sometimes...from when..."

"He got lost in the woods?" Bob finished.

"Yeah," she sighed.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, no. It'll be okay. I'll be back in just a little bit."

Joyce made it to the Wheelers' in record time. Will looked a little pale, but seemed to be no worse for wear. She gathered him up and apologized to Karen for the inconvenience. Karen assured her all was fine and wished them a better rest of the night.

Will was quiet on the drive home. He apologized again for ruining his mom's evening. She assured him he hadn't ruined anything and that everything was fine. That was the end of the conversation until they pulled into the driveway.

Joyce was shocked to see Hopper's Blazer in the driveway when they pulled in. From her vantage point, Bob and Hopper appeared to be arguing.

"Mom?" Will asked. "What's going on?"

"I-I'm not sure, honey."

She climbed out of the car and made her way to the porch.

"Joyce. Joyce! Would you tell him what's going on here?" Bob sounded exasperated.

"What? What are you doing here Hopper?"

"Well Joyce. It was the middle of the night and every light in your

house was on. Thought I'd stop by and make sure everything was alright. You know, make sure nothing untoward was going on. I find this guy here, but no one else."

"Will had a nightmare." She said as she pulled out a cigarette.

"Joyce." Bob admonished.

"Just..." she put up a hand to stop the incoming lecture. She knew Bob didn't like her smoking, but right now she really needed a cigarette.

"What are you doing here, Hopper?"

"What do you... I just told you what I was doing here."

She made a face at him. "It's been weeks. Since you've made any kind of effort to get in touch with me. And then you just show up at my front door at 3:30 in the morning and give Bob the run around?"

"I told you. All the lights were on. I was checking to make sure everything was okay." His tone was measured, but his irritation was barely concealed.

"I think you should go, Chief." Bob spoke up.

"Bob!" Joyce barked. "Hopper. You should..."

"What's Will doing in the car? Is everything okay?" Hopper changed the subject. He started walking toward the car.

"Hopper!" Joyce was really getting irritated.

"Hey, kid? Everything okay?"

"Yeah, Chief." Will replied. "Just had a nightmare." He shrugged.

"He was at the Wheelers' house." Joyce clarified.

"Same one as before?" Hopper asked.

Will nodded.

"What is going on?" Bob asked, clearly concerned.

"Nothing. Just- Nothing. Everything is fine. Will, honey, let's get you inside. Jim, we can talk about this later."

"Talk about what later?" Bob asked

"Nothing! There's nothing to talk about." Joyce replied.

"Nothing to talk about?" Hopper scoffed. "Nothing to talk about. She says there's nothing to talk about. That's rich."

"Jim..." She nearly growled.

"Yeah, Joyce. We'll talk about nothing later. Bob," he saluted. "Will, call if you need anything. Anything."

"Uh, Joyce? I think I might head home for the night. You know, let you and Will get settled. He doesn't need me around to complicate things."

Joyce just nodded. She was pretty sure she might cry, and she wasn't exactly sure how she was holding it all together right now. She watched as Bob got into his Camry and backed out of the driveway. Clearly he knew when he couldn't compete. But she wasn't sure if he thought he was competing with Will or Hopper.

Joyce ushered Will inside and got him back into bed. She sat at the side of his bed for a few minutes and rubbed his back.

"Mom?"

"Hmmm?"

"I'm sorry I ruined your night with Bob." Will apologized again.

"Oh sweetie, you didn't ruin anything!"

"But Bob left, and Hopper's mad, and you're sad."

"Don't worry about Bob and Hopper...or me. It'll all work out the way it's supposed to." She gave Will's head a squeeze.

With that she got up and headed out to the living room. She briefly wondered if it was even worth trying to go back to sleep. She pulled a cigarette and lighter out of her purse and made her way out to the porch. Joyce shouldn't have been surprised to find Hopper sitting on the rickety porch chair. He'd never listened before, why would he start now?

"What are you still doing here, Hop?"

He looked up at her. "Look, I didn't mean to ruin your evening, okay? I was driving past and I got concerned when I saw all the lights on. When I knocked on the door, Bob the Brain jumped down my throat."

Joyce frowned. "That doesn't seem like Bob."

Hopper looked back down at the cigarette in his hand. "He may have overheard some of the town gossip about us."

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"I was in Bradley's Big Buy the other night and a couple of the staff were talking. They stopped once they saw me, but Bob was close enough that he likely got an earful."

Joyce put her head in her hands. She hated this god-forsaken town and all the gossipy old ladies. She'd thought about putting the house on the market and starting over fresh, but where would she go? What would she do? This was the only place her boys had ever known. Hell, it was really the only place she'd ever known. At least she had an explanation for Bob's weird possessiveness the last few days.

"I have to go talk to Bob."

"What? Now? It's 4:30 in the morning, Joyce. Can't this wait until everyone can get some sleep?"

"Just stay here and keep an eye on Will? Please?" She pleaded.

Hopper just nodded and Joyce bolted off the porch, fired up the Gremlin, and took off. She found Bob sitting on his front porch, cup of coffee in hand.

"Joyce, what are you doing here? Where's Will?"

She didn't answer either question. "This isn't going to work, is it, Bob?"

He stared into his cup of coffee. "There's something going on with you and the Chief."

Joyce shook her head. "There's nothing going on between me and Hopper. This stupid town is nothing but a gossip mill."

"But you wish there was something between you and Hopper." Bob wasn't going to let up. "You left Will with him."

"I trust him."

"But you don't trust me."

"It's not that, Bob. Really. It's just this last year has been..." She didn't even know how to describe it when she couldn't even tell him the truth.

"It's fine. I get it." He smiled. "You should go home, Joyce."

"Bob..."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me. Things are complicated. Maybe when they're less complicated we could give this another go." He waved a hand between them.

"I'm sorry." She said quietly.

"Nothing to be sorry for. It was fun while it lasted."

Joyce made her way back to the car. She sat behind the wheel and cried silently for a few minutes before starting it back up and making the trek home. By the time she got back home, the sun had started rising, and Hopper had made his way back inside. The two steps up to her porch may as well have been Mount Everest for how exhausted she was. Hopper met her at the door, jacket and keys in hand. So he was leaving too.

Because you're nothing but a worthless fuck up. Her subconscious supplied in Lonnie's voice.

She couldn't stop the tears from flowing now, even if she wanted to. She always did this. Always screwed it all up. Hopper. Lonnie. Bob. Just a string of failed relationships. One after the other. It was no wonder she didn't date regularly.

Hopper stepped forward. "Hey," he said softly. "What's the matter."

Joyce sucked in a breath that threatened to turn into a sob. "Just go, Hop."

"I'm not going anywhere until I know you're okay."

It nearly broke him when she flinched away from his touch as he moved to pull her closer.

"Joyce. What happened?"

"Nothing, okay?" She sobbed. "Nothing happened."

"Did Bob do something to hurt you?"

"Nope. Just the opposite actually." She barked out a humorless laugh. "He broke it off. Guess I should have seen that coming."

Joyce tried to step around Hopper, but he wouldn't let her.

"Just go, Hopper. You should go home and get some sleep."

"I'm not going anywhere, Joyce."

"Then can we at least go inside? I'm freezing."

Hopper reached behind his back and pushed the door open. He let Joyce walk around him and followed her inside.

"I'm going to go lay back down for a little while." Joyce yawned.

Hopper just stood there. He was at a loss. He didn't want to leave her here like this, but he wasn't sure what else to do. Joyce had already started off toward the bedroom, but when she realized Hopper hadn't

followed her, she turned to look at him.

"Are you coming?"

"Uh...I figured I'd just stay out here. You know, on the couch."

"Hop, there's no way you're going to fit on my couch. Take my bed."

"What? No!" He protested.

"It's fine, Hop. The sheets are clean. I promise. I'll just lay down in Jonathan's room."

With that she left him standing in the hall as she gathered her pillow from her bedroom and toted it over to Jonathan's room. It took her forever to fall back asleep. She tossed and turned for what seemed like hours. She thought about all the things that had gone wrong with Bob. She dreamt about Hopper. She figured she must have slept some, because when she woke to the front door opening, the clock read 11:00 AM.

Hopper stood in the living room, dumbstruck. Was he really supposed to go sleep in Joyce's room? The room she'd just shared with Bob where they could have- no he wasn't going to think about that. He'd been up since 6:00 AM the day before, he desperately needed sleep, and that need for sleep won out over any protestations his overtired brain tried to make. He collapsed onto Joyce's bed, the smell of freshly washed sheets and *Joyce* lulled him into a dreamless sleep.

Hopper woke to the sound of the front door being opened. He leapt out of the bed and grabbed his side arm, tucking it into the waistband of his pants. He slowly opened the door to Joyce's room and peered out into the hall.

"Jesus, kid, you scared the shit out of me!" He whisper-yelled at a stunned Jonathan.

"Chief, I uh..."

"What's going on out here?" Joyce asked as she emerged from Jonathan's room.

"Wait a minute. What's going on? Mom, why is Hopper in your room. Why are you in my room?" Jonathan scrubbed his hands over his face. As much as he wanted for his mom and Hopper to stop doing this dance around one another, he wasn't sure he was prepared for the fallout. "Where's Will?"

"Will's in his room. I went to get him from the Wheelers' about three this morning. He had a nightmare."

"The same one as before?"

Joyce nodded.

"Bob was here. Hopper stopped by. It's complicated." She sighed heavily.

Jonathan just shrugged. "Everyone's okay though?"

"Yeah, everything is fine." Hopper jumped in.

Jonathan looked back and forth between his mom and Hopper. Something seemed off, but he couldn't figure out what it was. After a few moments he headed back out to the kitchen to start breakfast. Will would likely be starving when he woke up. Hopper mumbled something about taking a shower and Joyce followed Jonathan out to the kitchen.

"What happened last night?" Jonathan asked, hoping to get an honest answer this time.

Joyce sighed. She probably owed him the truth after everything they'd all been through. She relayed the whole messy story, including the break up. Jonathan didn't so much as make a face. She had to hand it to him, he had one hell of a poker face.

"But you're okay?"

"Yeah." She said with a heavy sigh. "I'm alright."

"The Chief...he cares about you, you know."

"Jonathan." She warned.

"I'm serious, Mom. Who else would have stuck around this long. Bob didn't. Lonnie sure as hell didn't. But, Hopper, he's been there through everything. He's still going to Will's appointments and stuff, right?"

"If I could have told Bob..."

Jonathan shook his head. "No, Mom. Even if you had told Bob. Even if he didn't think you were completely nuts. There's just no way."

Jonathan could see Hopper standing just around the corner then. Hopper knew he shouldn't let the kid fight his battles for him, but he could only tell Joyce the same thing so many times.

Joyce sniffed. "I wish none of this had ever happened."

"What? The part with Will? Hopper? Bob?"

"All of it. None of it. I don't know." She held back a sob.

"Mom." Jonathan pulled her into a hug. "Listen, I wish Will never had to go through any of this. I wish I could have taken his place. I wish none of this ever happened. But the Chief? He's a good guy, Mom. He's stuck around through a lot of shit and he just keeps coming back for more. And I get it if you want to think Bob would have stuck around if you'd been able to tell him, but I think you're wrong."

Joyce swiped a hand across her face. "When did you get so grown up?" She asked with a smile.

Hopper emerged from his spot in the hallway. "Everything okay out here?"

Joyce watched him for a moment before she nodded. "Hungry?" She asked.

"Starving," he replied as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

They were halfway through breakfast...or brunch...or whatever when Will joined them. As predicted he was starving and ate a tall stack of pancakes drowning in syrup.

"Want some pancakes with your syrup?" Jonathan teased.

Hopper helped with dishes before he headed out. He needed to check the box in the woods to see if El...or whoever...had taken the Eggos he'd left out the night before. Before he left he made Joyce promise to call if she needed anything.

Joyce spent what remained of the day cleaning. Every time she stopped to take a break, her thoughts turned to Bob and then Hopper. She knew Jonathan was right about Bob. She knew Hopper cared, but the last thing she wanted to do was drag that man down the Byers rabbit hole, even if that's where he really wanted to be. Eventually she filled the bathtub with hot water, got herself a glass of wine, and tried to unwind. The more she tried not to think, the more invasive the thoughts became. Hopper didn't do anything he didn't want to do. All the time he spent with them, helping them, going to Will's appointments, that was all on him. She wasn't guilting him into anything. She got out of the bath and laid down in bed. All she could do was toss and turn. No matter what she did, her mind refused to turn off. Sleep was elusive.

The next few days came and went in a blur. Midweek the boys were off for fall break. That meant they were spending a lot of time at the Wheelers'. Jonathan with Nancy and Will with The Party. After feeling like the week that would never end, Friday finally arrived. Both boys were spending the night at the Wheelers' and Joyce got a much needed chance to relax. At least this time if Will had a nightmare, Jonathan would be there.

Joyce sat on the couch with a glass of wine and plate of leftovers. She tried to watch some tv, but every channel she flipped through conjured some memory of Bob. So she ate her food and drank her wine in silence. Then she drank more wine. By the end of the evening she'd polished off the bottle. Too tired to do anything else, Joyce went to bed.

Her exhaustion miraculously disappeared as soon as she laid down. Suddenly she was wide awake and all she could think about was Hopper. That night on the porch when he'd told her he had feelings for her. The relief she felt when she saw him that night she'd gone to get Will from the Wheelers'. The aching longing she felt when she'd

returned home from Bob's and ordered him to her bed to sleep. Maybe that was the problem. She hadn't yet changed the sheets and they still smelled vaguely like Hopper's aftershave.

Joyce got up to change the sheets, but instead of going to the linen closet, she found herself standing in front of the phone. Without really thinking about what she was doing, she dialed Hopper's number. When her brain finally caught up with her fingers she hung up the phone. What was she even thinking calling Hopper? She turned her back to the wall and slid down to the floor, face in her hands. Hopper's phone had rung at least four times, by the time she'd hung up. She wondered momentarily what...or who...he was doing before deciding that was not a path she wanted to go down tonight. Just as she was about to get up and go back to bed, the phone rang, startling her.

"He-hello?" She answered.

"Did you just call?" Hopper's voice came through the line. He sounded as tired as she felt.

"Yeah...I..." She trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"Is everything okay? Is something wrong with Will?"

Joyce looked at the clock and realized it was after 11. "No...Yeah...everything's fine. Will's fine. I'm sorry, Hop. I shouldn't have called this late."

"Joyce. It's fine, really. You don't ever have to be sorry about calling me."

"You sound tired, Hop. You should get some rest."

"You don't sound like everything's okay," he said softly. "Do you want me to come over?" He sounded cautiously optimistic.

"No really, I'm okay." Silence for a moment and then, "good night, Jim."

She hung up the phone before she could hear his reply.

Before Hopper could think rationally about what he was doing, he was dressed and out the door. Something was wrong, even if Joyce didn't know it. He pulled out of the driveway flinging gravel every which direction. When he got to Joyce's the living room lights were still on, giving him hope that she was still awake. He tried the door, but found it locked. He fumbled around for the spare key he knew was hidden above the door frame. When he finally got inside he found Joyce sitting on the floor beneath the phone, knees pulled up to her chest, body shaking with silent sobs.

"Hey. What's wrong? Tell me what's wrong." He pleaded.

But that was the problem. She had no idea what the problem was or if she just didn't know how to articulate it. She didn't answer, but she didn't fight him when he pulled her up into his arms. He lead her over the couch and sat her down. It was then that he saw the wine glass and the empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. He couldn't blame her. With all they'd been through it was a miracle she'd made it this far completely sober. He'd been in this position too many times to count. Joyce let herself sink into him and Hopper let himself hold her just this one time.

Joyce woke with a start. She was curled up against Hopper and a part of her couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to wake up like this every morning. She shut that down before it could gain much traction though. Hopper stirred beneath her.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just stiff. I guess I'm getting too old to be sleepy on this lumpy old thing."

"Ouch," Hopper joked. "I know I've put on a few pounds, but I wouldn't say I'm lumpy."

Joyce smiled, genuinely smiled. "I should get to bed."

"Yeah," Hopper agreed. "Goodnight."

"Stay." She said quietly, not really asking.

Hopper nodded and followed her back to her bedroom. He fully

expected her to grab her pillow and retreat to Jonathan's room again. After she disappeared into the bathroom Hopper laid down on the bed. He had to lay sort of diagonal because his 6'3" frame was a little too large for Joyce's queen sized bed. It would have been an understatement to say he was surprised when Joyce shut off the bedroom light and climbed into the other side of the bed. For awhile she stayed on the edge of the bed, back to Hopper. Once his breathing settled into a slow rhythm she turned to face him. When that still wasn't enough she scooted a little closer, actively seeking out the warmth his body was radiating. After a few more moments Joyce tucked herself into his body, chest to chest, with her head resting just under his chin. He was so still, she was certain he was asleep, so she flinched a little when his arm wrapped around her, pulling her even closer.

"S'okay?" He asked, his voice rough with exhaustion.

Joyce nodded and let herself relax into him. They both fell into a dreamless sleep fairly quickly. When Hopper woke again, it was still dark out. The clock on the nightstand told him they'd only been asleep for a couple of hours. Somehow Joyce had wedged a knee between his legs as if she were trying to climb inside him. He couldn't honestly say he minded. This was the most content he'd felt in months. Though he knew he needed to sleep, he couldn't help but want to soak up every last second that she'd allow him to hold her. Eventually he drifted off again into a mercifully dreamless sleep.

When he awoke again Hopper was acutely aware of two things. First, the only sunbeam that had made it through the clouds had apparently deemed it necessary to land directly in his eyes this fine morning. Second, he was going to have a serious problem if Joyce woke up in this position. He was painfully hard. His current position with Joyce's butt pressed firmly against his groin was doing him absolutely no favors. He tried to scoot back a little, but she just followed him. What he didn't know was that she was already awake and had been for some time.

Joyce had been awake since before the sun had come up. She felt Hopper pressing against her. Fitting her perfectly. And no matter how much she knew she should get up and walk away she just couldn't. It's not like she didn't know what she was missing. They'd fooled

around behind the bleachers plenty of times in high school. But that'd been years ago when neither of them had any worldly experience. She remembered well what he could do for her back then and she had to think it'd be even better now. She tried desperately to shake those thoughts from her head and stop pressing back against him, but she just couldn't. She knew when he woke up. His whole body had tensed up and he'd tried to back away from her, but she wasn't letting him get away that easily.

Suddenly Joyce was hit with a burst of cool air as Hopper fled from the bed into the bathroom. He'd at least thrown the comforter back over her, but not without letting all the warm air out. She heard the water run for a few moments. Then silence. Then the toilet flushed and the water ran again for a moment before he reappeared in the bedroom.

"Everything okay, Hop?" She asked, innocently enough.

"Yeah." He stood awkwardly at the side of the bed.

"Come back to bed," she yawned.

"Too bright." Great, she'd reduced him to a monosyllabic caveman. This would go over well.

Joyce looked at the window. "Just pull the shade."

Hopper stared dumbly at the window for a moment before he realized there was room darkening pull shade under the lacey curtain. He pulled the shade and walked back over to the side of the bed. Before he could lay back down it occurred to him that Will and Jonathan could come back at any time. It'd been difficult enough to explain why he'd been in Joyce's room the first time. He couldn't imagine trying to explain why they were both there and in bed together.

"What about the...uh...the boys?"

"They're at the Wheelers' until Sunday. Will had some campaign thing and Jonathan and Nancy are working on a 'project.'" She said with air quotes. She'd been sixteen once and though it had been a long time

ago, she couldn't imagine much had changed. As long as they were being safe, that was all that mattered, and that was all Joyce cared to think about it. "Come back to bed, Jim."

There it was. His first name again. And something about the way she said it made goosebumps creep up his arms and down his back. Instead of thinking about all the reasons this was a terrible idea, Hopper climbed back into the bed and gathered Joyce back up into his arms again. With the shade closed it was dark enough that he could get a little more sleep.

When he woke a few hours later the space next to him was empty. He could smell the alluring scent of bacon and coffee. A quick glance at the clock told him it was 10:30. He dragged himself out of bed and made his way to the kitchen. He found Joyce leaning against the counter drinking her coffee.

"Look who decided to rejoin the land of the living.

"How long have you been up?"

His voice was gravelly with sleep and Joyce definitely noticed the effect it was having on her.

"I never fell back asleep after you got up earlier," she shrugged.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he scrubbed his hands across his face.

"Hungry?" She asked, ignoring his unnecessary apology.

"Starving," he admitted as he accepted the proffered cup of coffee.

Joyce handed him a plate and he scooped scrambled eggs and bacon onto it. As they ate, they talked about the last few weeks. Both carefully avoided the topic of the lingering tension between them. After they finished eating Hopper helped Joyce clear the dishes. As she filled the sink with hot water the phone rang. Joyce ran to answer the phone while Hopper started washing dishes. He could only vaguely hear her side of the conversation, but it sounded like Donald was trying to get her to come into work again.

Joyce returned to the sink looking like she held the weight of the

world on her shoulders. She could certainly use the overtime, but she was working herself to the point of exhaustion. She just needed a day to herself for once. She picked up the dishes Hopper had washed and rinsed and dried them. When she'd finally caught up to him he handed her the plate directly. Cliche as it was, the brush of his fingers against hers was like a jolt of electricity. She dropped the dish into the sink and looked up at Hopper. He looked concerned.

"You going into work?"

"No," she shook her head, "I told him he needed to find someone else for today."

"Good."

Joyce looked down at the dish in the sink and then back up at Hopper. All of a sudden her body decided not to do a damn thing her mind was commanding her to do. Without breaking eye contact, Joyce reached over and turned the water off. She dried her hands and very deliberately folded the towel before setting it on the counter. She was trying desperately to steady her shaking hands. She reached up and touched Hopper's cheek. He immediately turned into her touch.

If Joyce had any doubts left about Hopper's feelings they were long gone now. She leaned into him, resting her forehead against his chest. They stood that way for what felt like an eternity. Eventually the hand at his cheek slid down to curl around his neck and pull him down. Joyce tilted her own head upward and brushed her lips against his. Hopper sucked in a breath at the contact and wrapped an arm around her waist to pull her closer. His lips were softer than she'd imagined, and she'd spent a lot of time imagining them lately.

Hopper kissed her back with a fervor he didn't know he still possessed. The gentle brush of her lips against his ignited a fire he thought was long gone. Though he'd known he wanted this for months, the intensity of his need surprised him. He lifted Joyce onto the counter behind them without breaking the kiss. His hands slid up her neck, into her hair, down her back, and everywhere else he could reach. He had to know this was real. That it was really Joyce here beneath him. His lips trailed back behind her ear-making her gasp-

and down her neck to that spot between her neck and shoulder as his fingers worked the buttons on her sleep shirt. Just as Joyce's fingers made it to his belt, the phone rang again. Hopper groaned and leaned his forehead against Joyce's shoulder for a moment. Suddenly he grabbed her off of the counter and walked her toward the ringing phone as he continued to kiss her. Hopper trapped her between his body and the wall as he picked up the phone. Joyce pressed her face into his chest and inhaled the scent of leather and tobacco that was only appealing on Jim Hopper.

"Mr. Melvald." Hopper answered.

Joyce tried to hear what Donald was saying, but he wasn't loud enough.

"I see," Hopper replied. "The problem is that Joyce is a little busy this weekend. Some things have come up."

Joyce tried desperately not to laugh as Hopper pressed his hips into her.

"Oh no. Everything is fine. Just a few lingering details to wrap up from Will's, uh...disappearance." Silence for a moment. "Uh huh, I understand, unfortunately the government isn't so understanding about these matters and they want things done on their timeline." More silence. "Oh yes, she'll be in Monday for her shift. I'm sure we'll have everything settled by then. Sorry for the inconvenience. Uh huh. Bye, now."

Hopper hung up the phone and Joyce dissolved into a fit of laughter. He kissed her again as he pressed her into the wall.

"What's so funny, Byers?" He asked between kisses.

"Something came up?" She laughed as she drug a hand over the front of his jeans.

Hopper thrust into her touch as he nipped at her neck and ear. "Well it wasn't a lie."

"Well that ought to get the gossip mill up and going again."

Hopper shrugged.

Joyce fumbled with his belt for a minute before growing frustrated. Finally Hopper reached between them and flipped the cover of the belt buckle open so Joyce could pull the belt out of it. He shuddered when her fingers made contact with bare skin as she worked the button and zipper on his pants. Before she could get a hand in, Hopper had her shirt open and was toying with the clasp of her bra.

"Hop," she said breathlessly.

"Huh?" His lust-filled mind wasn't processing why she'd want to stop.

"Bedroom," she whispered as she pushed at him.

Oh.

On the way to the bedroom Joyce's shirt came off. Hopper's flannel landed somewhere in the living room. His white undershirt and belt landed in the hallway. Joyce's bra was left dangling on the doorknob outside of her room. He gently pushed her back onto the bed. He meant to follow her, but the way she looked at him stopped him dead in his tracks.

Joyce wasn't sure she'd seen anything as attractive as Jim Hopper standing in front of her disheveled and shirtless with his unbuttoned jeans slung low around his hips and his erection straining at the fabric. He guided her back onto the bed, but hadn't yet followed her. He just stood there watching her.

"Jim?"

This spurred him into action and he was back on her in a second. She pushed at his jeans as he pulled her flannel sleep pants down so she could kick them off. He moved off of her momentarily to pull his own jeans off. Once he'd kicked his jeans off he started exploring her body. He kissed a trail from behind her ear, down her neck, and between her breasts. He stopped for a detour to lick and suck at her nipples as she writhed beneath him. He continued down her stomach and his face disappeared between her thighs before she could stop him. He worked her clit with his tongue as he slid one and then two

fingers inside of her. Joyce tried to warn him that she was about to come, but the feeling overtook her before she had a chance. Her fingers wound through his hair, holding him still as he body clamped down on his fingers. Joyce was about to be embarrassed at how quickly he got her off until she saw the self-satisfied smirk on his face as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Instead she laid back and tried to remember how to breathe again.

Hopper had laid back down next to her. He had embarked on another slow exploration of her body before she realized he was still rock hard. The hand on his chest made a slow journey down his stomach before she slipped her hand under the waistband of his briefs. Hopper stopped his own activities and soon as he realized where Joyce's hand was headed. He watched as she took him into her hand and stroked firmly from base to tip before gathering the moisture there and spreading it around. She pressed one finger between his balls as she stroked him. It didn't take long for Hopper to realize this was going to be over almost as quickly as it had started.

"Joyce, I'm gonna..."

Before he could get the words out she had the tip of his cock in her mouth and she sucked gently as she continued to stroke him. Before he came in her mouth, he gently pushed her back. He wasn't fast enough to stop his impending orgasm from hitting him like a freight train.

"Shit...sorry." He scrubbed a hand over his face.

Joyce chuckled, "It's fine, Hop."

She reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a couple of tissues to clean up the mess he'd made on her stomach. Hopper tucked himself back into his briefs and laid there with his hands over his face. He wasn't embarrassed about how quickly he'd come, but he was embarrassed that he'd gone off like some inexperienced teenager. Joyce threw away the tissues and slid back into the bed beside him. Lonnie had never been a cuddler and as teenagers she and Hopper had never been in a position to cuddle afterward. She laid a few inches away watching the even rise and fall of his chest. After a few moments, Hopper reached out an arm and hauled her body against

his. Joyce tucked herself into him and rested her head on his shoulder. It didn't take long for them to surrender to the sweet pull of sleep.

They moved in and out of consciousness throughout the day, neither one of them realizing how exhausted they really were. During brief interludes of wakefulness they explored one another's bodies. During one such time Hopper mapped her body with his mouth until she could take no more and she pushed him onto his back. She moaned his name as her body adjusted to the size of him. She moved slowly over him as his thumb worked her clit. Once he'd gotten her off that way, he flipped them so Joyce was on her back under him. She writhed under him as he moved in and out. Her cries demanding her go harder and faster drove him to the edge far faster than he had intended. His whole body shuddered as he came. Once he recovered, Hopper pulled out and disposed of the condom in the trash.

When they woke again it was to the sound of tires on gravel and the front door creaking as it opened. Hopper flew out of bed and shoved his legs into his jeans. He flung the door open, grabbed Joyce's bra, and tossed it in her general direction. He gathered her shirt, his undershirt, his belt, and his flannel. When he stood up again, he came face to face with Jonathan.

"Hi." Jonathan said with a smirk.

"Uh. Hi."

"Everything alright?"

"Yep. Great. Your mom said you guys were staying with the Wheelers until tomorrow," Hopper said as he rubbed at the back of his neck with his free hand.

"Yeah, but Jonathan said we had to come home and have dinner with mom tonight so she wouldn't be alone." Will sounded slightly irritated.

"Well I thought she *was* alone. Anyway, I was just going to go pick up a couple pizzas."

"Good idea," Hopper agreed. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and grabbed some cash out to give to Jonathan.

"Thanks. Come on Will, let's go grab some dinner."

The younger boy, seemingly unfazed by a shirtless Hopper standing in the hallway with a pile of clothes, followed his brother back out to the car. He could hear the complaining about why they had to come back for dinner anyway since the chief was already there. Jonathan just chuckled and told Will he hadn't been expecting the chief to be there or he wouldn't have made him come home.

Hopper sighed. He knew this would set things back with Joyce. He padded back into the bedroom and found Joyce standing next to the window smoking a cigarette. She'd gotten dressed in the time he'd been dealing with the boys.

"Everything okay?" He asked cautiously.

"The boys must think I'm such an idiot."

"What? No. Why would they think that?" He slowly stepped toward her.

"It's been what? A week? Since Bob..." She waved her hand dismissively and she tried to contain a sob. "And now they come home to find you here...half dressed. And their dad...I couldn't even..."

Hopper pulled her into his arms. "Hey. It's okay," he whispered. "It's okay."

Joyce leaned her head against his chest. "I should go out there and talk to them."

"They're not here."

"What do you mean they're not here?" She asked.

"They left to get pizza. I gave Jonathan some money to go get pizza. He made Will come home to have dinner with you because they didn't want you to have to eat dinner alone."

A fresh round of tears started at that. She couldn't have asked for better boys. If only she could stop doing stupid things to jeopardize her relationship with them.

"Joyce," he said with authority. "Joyce, look at me. Those boys love you more than anything. They'd do anything for you. All they want is to see you happy. They don't care how that happens or who it happens with."

"How do you-"

"I was thirteen when my dad died. You remember what a mess I was. I honestly couldn't tell you who my mom dated, or how long, or how long she even waited to start dating after my dad died. I don't think I could name a single man my mom dated before she remarried. I just didn't care. After seeing her so sad about my dad, all I wanted was for her to be happy again."

Joyce nodded. "Okay."

"Come on. Let's go back out into the living room before they catch us in here for a second time today. I can't promise that if we keep traumatizing them that they'll forget I ever existed if you kick me to the curb."

This earned him a snort of laughter from Joyce, "you're going to wish you were so lucky that I'd kick you to the curb." She took his hand and led him out of the bedroom back into the living room. "In all seriousness, Hop, this family is a mess. I'm a mess. Lonnie still tries to come around now and again. If you're looking for something simple or-or without strings...this isn't it."

"Joyce, I want this. I want you. I want you and your boys and your baggage and your strings. All of it. I spent a long time trying to dull the ache of my lost family with alcohol and...other stuff. I wanted to forget."

"Hop," she reached up to touch his face.

"But I don't want to forget. I don't want to. Being with you...I don't have to forget. I can be with you and it doesn't hurt so much, and I

don't have to forget."

Joyce stood up on her tip toes and pulled his head down to kiss him. His arms wound around her middle and he lifted her a little. Just as he moved to deepen the kiss, the front door swung open.

"Ewww." Will groused.

Joyce and Hopper broke apart, faces red with embarrassment.

"Shut up." Jonathan elbowed him.

"I told you," he muttered at Jonathan.

"So, mom should get to be happy too, you know."

"I told you," Hopper elbowed Joyce with a laugh.

Hopper took the pizza boxes from Jonathan and made his way into the kitchen. Will set the table as Joyce opened up the boxes on the counter and got sodas out of the fridge. They all loaded their plates with pizza and breadsticks and sat down at the table to eat. Joyce worried that this would be awkward even though both boys seemed to like Hopper. After a few minutes of tense silence Will launched into an explanation of the newest D&D campaign dreamed up by Mike. Joyce watched as Hopper took it all in. Feigned excitement turned into actual interest as he engaged her youngest boy. All of her fears were laid to rest as she watched Jonathan watching his brother and Hopper. This was the happiest any of them had been in a long time and it was a sight for sore eyes.